

## FAILED EXORCISM: KURTZ'S SPECTRAL STATUS AND ITS IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTION IN CONRAD'S 'HEART OF DARKNESS'

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It is quite remarkable how Marlow's recurrent characterisation of Kurtz as a spectre in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' has passed almost unnoticed in the large body of criticism on the novella. This essay interprets Marlow's persistent expression of loyalty to Kurtz's ghost as the last in a series of ideological strategies that endow the imperialist culture in which he is embedded with a minimum degree of consistency that counterbalances the debilitating exposure of its evils. The ensuing pages develop this central thesis concerning Kurtz's ghostly status by drawing on Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian approach to the ideological function of the spectre, which allows the author to diverge from other readings of 'Heart of Darkness' relevant to this topic. An exploration of the logic of spectrality helps to explain why the novella falls short in its indictment of imperialist ideology, a failure which, in the last instance, amounts to an endorsement.

Keywords: 'Heart of Darkness'; Kurtz; spectre; ideology; Žižek; voice

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### ***EXORCISMO FALLIDO: EL ESTATUS ESPECTRAL DE KURTZ Y SU FUNCIÓN IDEOLÓGICA EN 'HEART OF DARKNESS' DE CONRAD***

*Sorprende el hecho de que la recurrente caracterización de Kurtz como espectro en 'Heart of Darkness' de Conrad haya pasado prácticamente desapercibida en la ingente cantidad de trabajos críticos sobre esta novela corta. En este ensayo se interpreta la persistente expresión de lealtad de Marlow hacia el fantasma de Kurtz como la última de una serie de estrategias ideológicas que dotan a la cultura imperialista en la que está inscrito de un mínimo de consistencia que contrapesa el desenmascaramiento debilitador de sus males. En las páginas que siguen se desarrolla esta tesis central sobre el estatus fantasmal de Kurtz tomando como base la interpretación lacaniana que Slavoj Žižek hace sobre la función ideológica del espectro, lo que permite al autor distanciarse de otras lecturas de la obra de Conrad relevantes para el tema tratado. Un análisis de la lógica de la espectralidad ayuda a explicar por qué la novela no acaba de condenar del todo la ideología imperialista, una inhibición que equivale, en última instancia, a una adhesión.*

*Palabras clave:* 'Heart of Darkness'; Kurtz; espectro; ideología; Žižek; voz

## 1. Introduction

Critics of Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' have shown little concern towards Marlow's persistent characterisation of Kurtz as a spectre.<sup>1</sup> He describes Kurtz as a "disinterred body", a "ghost", a "shade", an "initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere", "an animated image of death", a "shadow", an "atrocious phantom", an "apparition", "a vapour exhaled by the earth" and an "eloquent phantom" (Conrad 1946: 115, 117, 134, 142, 160). Even those critics who frame the novella within the genre of the gothic either overlook this conspicuously *gothic* element or just go no further than dropping some passing remark on the topic.<sup>2</sup> John Hillis Miller's 'Joseph Conrad: Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?', chapter five of his book *Others* (2001), is a most remarkable exception. Miller's argument concerning the novella revolves around the unexplained obligation that Marlow feels towards Kurtz, a sort of fateful imperative he cannot but obey.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, immediately after what I consider the privileged blind spot in his narrative, Marlow justifies his decision to go after Kurtz, who had left the steamboat to return to his nightly worshippers in the wilderness, in the following terms: "I did not betray Mr Kurtz —*it was ordered* I should never betray him— *it was written* I should be loyal to the nightmare of *my choice*. I was anxious to deal with *this shadow* by myself alone" (Conrad 1946: 141. Emphases added). In being loyal to Kurtz, Marlow is, according to Miller, fulfilling the ethical injunction of telling "the truth about the dead" whom one survives (2001: 107). Yet, Miller adds, what is peculiar about Marlow's bond is that it is an act of faith towards one who is already a ghost from the very beginning:

Kurtz is presented when Marlow finally encounters him as already the survivor of his own death. Kurtz is already the ghost of himself. In that sense he cannot die. This is testified to in the way he survives in Marlow's narration and in the way the dusk still whispers his last words when Marlow returns to Europe and visits Kurtz's 'Intended'. It is hardly the case that Marlow has laid the ghost of Kurtz's gifts with a lie, since the ghost still walks, even in the room where Marlow tells his lie to the Intended. The ghost, far from being laid, is resurrected, invoked, conjured up, each time *Heart of Darkness* is read (2001: 107).

According to this, 'Heart of Darkness' is a text that activates a chain of compulsory (and, we may add, compulsive) interpretations focused on Kurtz's ghost which starts with Marlow's narrative, passes then on to the unnamed frame-narrator, and afterwards transcends the intratextual limits to affect any reader of the Conrad novella. We, readers, like Marlow and the receptive listener of his inconclusive oral tale, must remain faithful to Kurtz's ghost and

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Lipka (2008) and Glover (2001). Mark Wollaeger (1990) frames Conrad's *oeuvre* within the tradition of philosophical scepticism and relates its gothic and melodramatic elements to a covert search for the sacred. Although he explores the presence of the trope of the ghost in Conrad's earlier short pieces, Wollaeger's only statement concerning Marlow's relation to "the diabolical specter of Kurtz" is that it elicits a "[r]esentment at feeling dependent [which] may cover a deeper fear", a fear of vacancy due to the absence of God (1990: 75).

<sup>3</sup> Bernard J. Paris points out that Marlow's acknowledged loyalty to Kurtz is the key enigma of the novella and expressed his surprise at how little critical attention this aspect had received (2005: 42-43). Paris explains this bond in terms of Marlow's identification with Kurtz and his wish to preserve his good name.

join the endless circuit of performative interpretations which are so many failed attempts to exorcise this spectre. Kurtz functions as the privileged instance of radical otherness that, paradoxically at once, cannot *and* should not be finalised, demanding justice from us, and keeping “[t]he structure of *Heart of Darkness* ... a self-perpetuating system of an endlessly deferred promise” (Miller 2001: 126).

I share Miller's opinion that Kurtz's spectre is not exorcised despite Marlow's affirmation that he had “laid the ghost of his gifts with a lie” (Conrad 1946: 115).<sup>4</sup> Unlike Miller, however, I interpret Marlow's failed exorcism and his concomitant loyalty to Kurtz's ghost not as an ethical obligation to avoid totalising temptations and keep the field of otherness open, but as Marlow's last-ditch attempt to preserve the coherence of the British and imperialist culture in which he is embedded and from which he derives his identity. Thus, for me, Kurtz-as-ghost functions in Marlow's narrative discourse as the last and lasting one in a long series of ideological strategies. Although *it*, the ghost, does evoke an opening that activates the production of potentially countless interpretations, it also serves to cover the void of what Jacques Lacan called *the real*, which Marlow encounters at what I take to be “the culminating point of my [Marlow's] experience” (Conrad 1946: 51). In the end, to remain loyal to Kurtz's spectre is Marlow's way of avoiding the traumatic real of his own desire and the horror of cutting off his symbolic moorings in an act of freedom. Because he is both incapable *and* unwilling to exorcise Kurtz's spectre, Marlow cannot but reproduce imperialist ideology.

## 2. Two versions of the spectre: Žižek with Lacan and against Derrida

Miller's conception of the ghost and its implications for the living owes a great deal to Jacques Derrida, whose work he cites frequently. Derrida (1994) conceived of the spectre as that which disjoins the stability of the present by its apparition, as the point of “*non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*” (1994: xix.; Italics in original). In the political field, all dominant forms of power try to exorcise the spectre in order to restore the menaced presence. Thus, the emancipatory potential of the spectre lies in the fact that it stands as an opening towards, a possibility for, and a promise of freedom and justice if and only if we respond, listen and speak to it (Derrida 1994: xix, 11, 12, 33, 38, 58, 65).<sup>5</sup> Hence Derrida's ethico-political message in this work is that the spectre must not be made present through exorcism, conjuration or ontologisation, as the latter would entail the dissolution of the spectre's spectrality, the effacement of “the heterogeneity of the other” (Derrida 1994: 29), and the deactivation of its liberating potential. Faith, duty, responsibility to the spectre is the right, just, liberating attitude one must retain; what he calls *hauntology* as opposed to *ontology*.<sup>6</sup> “Totalitarian perversions” like savage capitalism, Fascism, and Stalinism are for Derrida “the effect of an *ontological* treatment of the spectrality of the ghost” (1994: 93). In sum, the ontologisation of the spectre is a way to cope with the fear caused by the spectre's call to freedom (Derrida 1994: 104-05).

<sup>4</sup> Peter E. Firkow in his book-length study of ‘Heart of Darkness’ affirms that Marlow does not lay Kurtz's ghost in the end and that readers of the novella are also haunted by this phantom (2000: 80).

<sup>5</sup> Derrida's notion of the *spectre-as-other* is based on Emmanuel Lévinas's *Totalité et infini* (1961), a work in which justice, or the possibility thereof, is literally equated to our relation to the other's otherness: “‘The relation to others—that is to say, justice’” (Lévinas qtd. in Derrida 1994: 23).

<sup>6</sup> “Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration” (Derrida 1994: 161).

Slavoj Žižek opposes Derrida's view of the spectre *qua* herald of freedom/justice-to-come and the latter's defence of spectral Otherness as our ultimate ethico-political horizon. From a Lacanian perspective, Žižek argues that the uncanny, fear-inspiring, terrifying, horrifying spectral apparition is already, in itself, a withdrawal, a retreat, an escape from freedom. Thus, Žižek writes in "The Spectre of Ideology" (1994a):

'freedom' designates the moment when the 'principle of sufficient reason' is suspended, the moment of the *act* that breaks the 'great chain of being', of the symbolic reality in which we are embedded; consequently, it is not sufficient to say that we fear the spectre—the spectre itself already emerges out of a fear, out of our escape from something even more horrifying: freedom. ... Therein resides the gap that separates Lacan from Derrida: our primary duty is not towards the spectre, whatever form it assumes. The act of freedom *qua* real not only transgresses the limits of what we experience as 'reality', it cancels our primordial indebtedness to the spectral Other (1994a: 27-28).

Freedom—that is, the breakaway from our subjection to the symbolic order that structures the real into 'reality'—should be the truly emancipatory outcome of our encounter with the real. However, because this encounter suspends "the symbolic reality in which we are embedded", we withdraw in horror, and the spectral apparition is primarily an effect of this horror and not its cause. Žižek agrees with Derrida in that the "elusive pseudo-materiality" of the spectre "subverts the classic ontological oppositions of reality and illusion, and so on" (Žižek 1994a: 20-21). Yet, whereas for Derrida (and for Miller) the ghost prevents the closure of the ethico-political order by preserving the place for otherness so that our obligation towards the ghost empowers us to resist full subjection, in Žižek's Lacanian view it is precisely the spectre and our loyalty to it that eventually allows for the closure of the ideological field. The spectre fills the gap in the symbolic order and endows the symbolically constructed 'reality' in which we, subjects, are embedded with the needed minimum degree of coherence:

it is here [in the spectre] that we should look for the last resort of ideology, for the pre-ideological kernel, the formal matrix, on which are grafted the various ideological formations: in the fact that there is no reality without the spectre, that the circle of reality can be closed only by means of an uncanny spectral supplement. ... ([W]hat we experience as) reality is not the 'thing itself', it is always-already symbolized, constituted, structured by symbolic mechanisms—and the problem resides in the fact that symbolization ultimately always fails, that it never succeeds in fully 'covering' the real, that it always involves some unsettled, unredeemed symbolic debt. *This real (the part of reality that remains non-symbolized) returns in the guise of spectral apparitions.* ... [S]pectral apparitions emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the real, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality. The pre-ideological 'kernel' of ideology thus consists of the *spectral apparition that fills up the hole of the real.* (Žižek 1994a: 21; Italics in the original).

The spectre therefore signals a breach in the ideological edifice, yet works at once as the pseudo-material stuff to keep it (even if precariously) erected. This duality determines the logic of Marlow's relationship to Kurtz's spectre which is at the base of the ambiguous and contradictory position he holds towards imperialist ideology that critics, particularly from Terry Eagleton onwards, have not failed to point out.<sup>7</sup> Tending to the ghost, remaining loyal

<sup>7</sup> "The message of *Heart of Darkness*", Eagleton writes, "is that Western civilisation is at base as barbarous as African society—a viewpoint which disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them" (1976: 135). The interpretation of the novella as both an attack on

to it, is, in the last instance, an ideological gesture that Marlow adopts to avoid carrying out the “act of freedom *qua* real” (Žižek 1994a: 27), even if, and precisely because, such a gesture is unsettling and nightmarish.

### 3. Subject, object and the nature of symbolised reality

The linkage between the free act and the real was formulated by Lacan in his seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. An “act, a true act”, Lacan stated, “always has an element of structure, by the fact of concerning a real that is not self-evidently caught up in it” (1981: 50). The act *qua* real has effects on symbolically structured reality and on the subject’s immersion in it. It is thus that Žižek, following Lacan, argues that “an act proper is the only one which structures the symbolic co-ordinates of the agent’s situation: it is an intervention in the course of which the agent’s identity itself is radically changed” (2001: 85; see also Žižek 2000: 125). The symbolic order, *via* interpellation, elicits in the subject the identification with certain social models, the assumption of certain subject-positions and the internalisation of certain regulations. However, it is not only the subject that is split, barred, traversed by a void (\$), but also the field of the big Other, the symbolic order (Ø) (Žižek 1989: 122). The function of ideology is, precisely, that of providing substitute fantasy-objects to compensate for the desiring subject’s constitutive loss of the primordial object, to reinforce his/her subjection through the supplement of enjoyment attached to these objects, and to veil the gaps, inconsistencies and antagonisms of the socio-symbolic field.<sup>8</sup>

As I have discussed elsewhere, we come across two fantasy-objects articulated in Marlow’s narrative discourse the function of which is to avoid the real of antagonism through, on the one hand, the presumption of some transcendental essence that defines the identity of normative subjects beyond symbolic prescriptions and that endows the symbolic field with solidity and coherence, namely, Marlow’s invocation of some indeterminate ‘true stuff’, which I called *introjected object* [Conrad 1946: 97]), and, on the other, the projection of conflicts and inconsistencies inside the symbolic field (natives and jungle as the *projected object* onto which antagonism is displaced and condensed) (Sacido Romero 2009).<sup>9</sup> To these two ideological rationalisations<sup>10</sup> we must add several other strategies that allow Marlow to fence

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and a reproduction of imperialist ideology was already advanced by Conrad himself in his letter of February 8, 1899, to Robert Cunninghame Graham (Conrad 1983: 157-58). For further opinions see Benita Parry (1983: 2), Patrick Brantlinger (1988: 265), Vincent Pecora (1989: 145), Gary Aldeman (1987: 50), Edward W. Said (1993: 23-25, 30), Beth Sharon Ash misdirection (1999: 80) and Terry Collits (2005: 108).

<sup>8</sup> In *The Plague of Fantasies* Žižek writes that “the ‘sublime object of ideology’ is the spectral object which has no positive ontological consistency, but merely fills in the gap of a certain constitutive impossibility” (1997: 76). He gives the following definition of ideology: “a symbolic field which contains such a filler holding the place of some structural impossibility” (1997: 76). See also Žižek (1997: 1, 75-77, 2005: 276-77).

<sup>9</sup> For a definition of *introjection* and *projection* and their reformulations in the work of different authors see Laplanche and Pontalis (1985: 229-31, 349-56). Though mainly not in psychoanalytical terms, the dynamics of projection has been the main target of postcolonial approaches to the novella that underline its imperialist bias. See, for instance, Chinua Achebe (1988: 251-52), Francis B. Singh (1988: 272), Fayad (1990: 300), Zhuwarara (1994: 26), A. James M. Johnson (1997: 112).

<sup>10</sup> I use the word in the sense the psychoanalysis gives to the term *rationalisation*: “a procedure whereby the subject attempts to present an explanation that is either logically consistent or ethically

off the twinges of bad conscience for having joined what he feels is a “conspiracy” (Conrad 1946: 56) and to preserve a basic quota of stable identity through an otherwise exceedingly disruptive experience in the context of high imperialism. He justifies his participation in the colonial concern by referring to his unemployment (Conrad 1946: 52-53), to his seduction by overpowering forces such as the fascinating river on the map and the fateful knitters of black wool (Conrad 1946: 56-57), and to his enlightened and cynical (un)belief in the goodness of the Company and of the civilising mission which, as Johanna M. Smith has argued, is counterbalanced in the novella by the two white women, Marlow’s aunt and Kurtz’s Intended, whose naïve credulity “will keep the masculine world [of crude reality] from deteriorating” (1989: 193). In carrying out the function of believing, both women fill in the dots in Marlow’s statement about the superiority of British imperialism: “What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . .” (Conrad 1946: 51. Ellipsis in the original). To Smith’s argument it should be added, however, that if such a vicarious dynamics is possible, it is because, as Žižek states, “the most intimate beliefs, even the most intimate emotions such as compassion, crying, sorrow, laughter, can be transferred, delegated to others without losing their sincerity” (1989: 34).<sup>11</sup> Marlow laughs at women’s naïve belief in the philanthropic mission trumpeted forth daily in the newspapers (to which Kurtz contributed), yet his words betray him: white colonial agents in general and Marlow in particular, using Marlow’s own words, “set the women to work” to do the job of believing in the redeeming virtues of imperialism, so that they may go about exploiting the natives and robbing the land of its wealth, “not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (Conrad 1946: 53, 50-51).<sup>12</sup> Despite his presumed unbelief, Marlow goes on doing his job as best he can. In other words, the belief from which he distances himself in theory is inscribed into the very practice of his appointed duty.

In what follows I will develop the idea of the ideological status of Kurtz’s spectre by first locating the exact point of Marlow’s encounter with the real and reviewing Lacanian approaches to the novella; second, examining the particular aural nature of spectrality (voice as *objet a*) and its link to the obscene superego underside of the Law, and finally concluding that Marlow’s failure to exorcise Kurtz’s spectre is the last resort to reproduce imperialist ideology in the novella despite his own exposure of its evils.

#### 4. Marlow’s encounter with the real and his flight to Kurtz as spectre: forced choice vs. ethical act

Marlow’s tale of his experience in “the centre of a continent” (Conrad 1946: 60) contains a particular moment of incomparably intense and absolutely contingent horror which in Lacanian theory is precisely known as “*the encounter with the real*” (Lacan 1981: 53; Italics in original). Lacan pronounced this phrase in session 5 of his seminar titled “Tuché and Automaton”, in the midst of a discussion on Freud’s fundamental concept of repetition-

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acceptable for attitudes, ideas, feelings, etc., whose motives are not perceived” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1985: 375).

<sup>11</sup> Žižek refers to the example given by Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: the Greek Chorus. The Chorus feels pity and horror for us, so that we, at once, experience these feelings and are freed from the duty of having to do it.

<sup>12</sup> Johanna M. Smith is right in underscoring the ideological function of the aunt and the Intended in the novella, yet falls short in explaining how and why it works.



compulsion. In brief, *tuché* is the Aristotelian term used by Lacan to designate the encounter with the real which is the cause of the repetition-compulsion in the symbolic order (*automaton*). "The real", Lacan states, "is beyond the *automaton*, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle" (1981: 53-54). The symbolic order, ruled by the pleasure principle, strives for stability, for homeostasis, but is always frustrated in this pursuit by something it cannot assimilate, a scrap left over in the symbolising process that structures reality, "the kernel of the real" (1981: 53) that lies beyond the pacifying, meaning-giving register of the symbolic. One of the exemplary manifestations of the real is trauma. Trauma is what set Freud on the track towards the formulation of the repetition-compulsion and the death-drive in view of the fact that some of his patients fell prey to a sort of automatism that made them re-experience painful incidents, a fact that challenged his previous view that the pleasure-principle was the sovereign ruler of our mental life and that dreams were just wish fulfilments (Freud 2001: 32). Lacan states: "The function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter—the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter—first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in a form that was ... that of the trauma" (1981: 55). This traumatic event resists being apprehended by symbolic categories (it is 'missed') because it is related to the subject's own unconscious desire which for Lacan finds in the dream its privileged scenario: "It is only in the dream that this truly unique encounter can occur" (1981: 59).

With Kurtz finally on board the steamboat, Marlow wakes up "shortly after midnight" and walks on deck to fall asleep again "leaning over the rail" because of the "strange narcotic effect upon [his] half-awake senses" of the "steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation" (Conrad 1946: 140-41). He wakes up a second time because of "an abrupt burst of yells, an overwhelming outbreak of a pent-up and mysterious frenzy" which "was cut short all at once, and the low droning went on with an effect of audible and soothing silence" (Conrad 1946: 141). Marlow relates how, after finding out that Kurtz was not in his cabin, he went through a moment of incomparably intense, indescribable horror. The extraordinary nature of this experience is enhanced in the text by sorting out the passage through full stops:

I think I would have raised an outcry if I had believed my eyes. But I didn't believe them at first—the thing seemed so impossible. The fact is I was completely unnerved by sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger. What made this emotion so overpowering was—how shall I define it?—the moral shock I received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly. This lasted of course the merest fraction of a second, and then the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre, or something of the kind, which I saw impending, was positively welcome and composing. It pacified me, in fact, so much, that I did not raise an alarm (Conrad 1946: 141).

Relieved by the recovery of his sense of reality, of a reality of deadly dangers and potential massacres, Marlow jumps ashore to rescue Kurtz from the call of his night adorners. This act of loyalty to Kurtz is inflected in paradoxical terms: as both an incontestable injunction ("it was ordered", "it was written") and an act of the will ("the nightmare of my choice") (Conrad 1946: 141. *Emphasis added*). What becomes apparent at this point is that Marlow's faithful attachment to Kurtz's 'shadow' is a fantasy erected in the outmost confines of symbolically constructed reality to prevent its complete collapse due to the traumatic eruption of the real, of that which—because, as Lacan states, "it is essentially the missed encounter"—Marlow cannot provide any identifiable, communicable, trait, and just says that

it was “impossible”, exempt from normal temporalisation (“lasted the merest fraction of a second”), overwhelmingly terrifying (“sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror”) and absolutely contingent (“thrust upon me unexpectedly”). As such, Kurtz’s loyalty-inspiring spectre in Marlow’s experience (“a dream”, he calls it) and in his narrative (“relation of a dream”) serves as a veil to hide the encountered real (“the incredible”), which is “impossible”, which cannot be symbolised, rendered in words,<sup>13</sup> yet triggers the production of signifiers (his narrative) in a foredoomed attempt to grasp it (Conrad 1946: 82).

Some recent approaches to ‘Heart of Darkness’ where use is made of the Lacanian notion of the real—particularly relevant and insightful are the contributions of French Conradians—have failed to take into account Kurtz’s spectral status and its ideological function in Marlow’s narrative discourse. The most explicit is Josiane Paccaud-Huguet’s passing remark on Kurtz’s being “the ‘phantasmagorical’ figure on the screen of fiction, for that impossible subject position: to rejoin, and rejoice in the inhuman, forbidden area of the Freudian Thing” (2004: 172). In her reading of the early Marlow narratives and ‘Karin’, Paccaud-Huguet states that Kurtz and Jim (in *Lord Jim*) affect Marlow because they had performed an act of transgression towards the real, considering Kurtz as “clearly a good candidate for embodying *jouissance* of the thing in itself at its purest” (2006: 76). Because he accepts this transgression, Paccaud-Huguet argues, Kurtz becomes heroic in Marlow’s eyes and so deserves his loyalty.<sup>14</sup> Reynold Humphries is the only critic who refers to the passage about “a sheer blank fright” quoted in full above as one which marks “the presence of the real” (1998: 11). For him, Kurtz’s “The horror! The horror” is also “the encounter with the real” and considers the jungle the place of the maternal body and the site of incestuous desires (Humphries 1998: 12). Establishing a comparison between Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’ and some horror films, Humphries describes Kurtz as a “living-dead” which elicits Marlow’s guilt due to repressed incestuous desires, yet interprets Kurtz’s status as “*mort-vivant*” as a condensation of the relationship between cannibalism and death (1998: 15). Moreover, he connects Marlow’s recurrent use of spectral terminology specifically to “the whites adrift ... in the African continent” (Humphries 1998: 18). Tony C. Brown has recourse to Žižek’s notion of psychosis to conceptualise the darkness located in Africa as what “fills out and blocks the perspective” of civilization and its constitutive codes” (Žižek 1991: 52. Qtd. in Brown 2000: 16). The colonial frontier which the Congo best represented in the discourse of the times was the site of a formless void which threatened the consistency of European culture and had to be foreclosed. Brown quotes from Conrad’s personal account of his Congo experience in ‘Geography and Some Explorers’ (1924) and in Edward Garnett’s ‘Introduction to *Letters from Joseph Conrad, 1895-1924*’ (1928) to support his view that the adventurous youthful illusions which worked as a frame organising his experience of *reality* (in the Lacanian sense of the term) were destroyed by something which blocked the perspective. Conrad’s traumatic encounter is interpreted by Brown in terms of Lacan’s “encounter with the real” (2000: 20). Yet, Brown’s reading of ‘Heart of Darkness’ relies too much on youthful illusions as the “fantasy-frames” constitutive of reality in their confrontation with the real (2000: 20). True, Conrad and Marlow had to foreclose the threat of dissolution to restore culture’s consistency and reinstitute the authority of cultural codes,

<sup>13</sup> Lacan calls it “*unassimilable*” and also “the impossible” (1981: 55, 167. Emphasis in original).

<sup>14</sup> Christine Texier (2002) substantiates the distinction between the real and reality in the Conrad novella by opposing fragmentariness, suggestiveness, negation, formlessness as characteristic features of the real to binding, framing, shaping, veiling elements, images and language which are constitutive of reality as a counterweight to the real.



but whereas the remains of his childish tendency to follow the steps of explorers and discover some uncharted lands may have been the stuff that Conrad's fantasy-scenario was made of, in Marlow's case this seems not to be so.<sup>15</sup> As he tells his audience, the blank space he "had a hankering after ... was not a blank space anymore. ... It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over" (Conrad 1946: 52). Apart from codes, from 'reality' structured by the symbolic order, it is true that the supplement of fantasy is needed. Yet, Marlow's sustaining fantasy is not of the type of juvenile illusion he celebrated before the same audience of friends in 'Youth: A Narrative' (1898): fantasy in Marlow's account in 'Heart of Darkness' is of another nature, and it manifests itself in the different ideological strategies of which Kurtz's spectre is the last and seemingly everlasting one: "I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond" (Conrad 1946: 151). Taking into account his direct reference to Lacan's thesis about 'the encounter with the real' in *Four Fundamental Concepts*, it is rather surprising that Brown does not select the passage where this encounter is more directly rendered but chooses instead to place the spotlight on what happens right afterwards in the jungle as the "heightened, climatic point in the novel [where] there is revealed the absolute and terrifying failure of signification and its attendant authority in the midst of the dark wilderness" (2000: 23). At this point Marlow had already fled from this most frightening and traumatic experience into the reality preserved by the nightmare of his choice, forever haunted by Kurtz's spectre, which works, as Lacan says, as "the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the function of repetition" (1981: 60). In the act of recounting that exceptional past experience,<sup>16</sup> Marlow is visited again by the ghost whose exorcism he had not performed so as to prevent his disengagement ("*separation*" in Lacanian terms [1981: 213]) from the symbolic order and retain his position as a normative subject throughout ("He was the only man of us who *still* 'followed the sea'" [Conrad 1946: 48. Emphasis added]). Thus, in the account of his visit to the Intended, Marlow states: "For her he had died only yesterday. And, by Jove! the impression was so powerful that for me, too, he seemed to have died only yesterday—nay, *this very minute*.... I saw him clearly enough then. *I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live*" (Conrad 1946: 157, 160. Emphases added).<sup>17</sup> The ethereal and growingly aural efflorescence (Kurtz's spectre) emerging from Marlow's encounter with the real returns in the reactualisation of his experience in the narrative: "it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice. I was anxious to deal with this shadow by myself alone,—and to this day I don't know why I was so jealous of sharing with any one the peculiar blackness of that experience" (Conrad 1946: 141-42).

<sup>15</sup> Actually, evidence from letters of the period in which Conrad got his command of a steamboat belonging to the *Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo* shows that his frame of mind at that time was far from the childish or youthful fantasising that Tony Brown says organised Conrad's Congo experience and that was thrown into complete disarray after his traumatic encounter with the real. (See Conrad's letter from Tenerife to Marguerite Poradowska of 15 May 1890 in Conrad [1983: 51]).

<sup>16</sup> Exceptional both professionally ("I suppose you fellows remember I did *once* turn fresh-water sailor for a bit" [Conrad 1946: 51.) and psychologically ("relation of *a dream*...of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams" [Conrad 1946: 8]; Italics added in both).

<sup>17</sup> Marlow's use of the adverb *yesterday* ("he had died only yesterday"), instead of *the day before* or *the previous day*, is ungrammatical and indicates how the spectre undermines chronological order in his account, causing a temporal confusion of past and present that collapse into one another and are projected into a future in which the haunting persists ("this very minute", "as long as I live").

Beyond the chain of signifiers (Marlow's tale) there persists the spectral screen of the unsymbolisable, impossible real, tantalisingly precluding symbolic closure in a fully comprehensible narrative: "no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, ... it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone. . . ." (Conrad 1946: 82. 2<sup>nd</sup> ellipsis in the original). However, Kurtz's spectre functions *at the same time* as a fantasmatic supplement to screen the void of the real, so that, I maintain, what hinges Marlow and his narrative to the symbolic—in spite of his ironic detachment from regulating ideas and beliefs of the markedly imperialist ideology in which he is embedded—is his attachment to the ghost of Mr Kurtz. It is the thin, yet overpowering, layer of Kurtz's spectre that serves to obfuscate the real of his desire, that keeps Marlow from carrying out a free act that deserves the qualification of *ethical* according to Lacan's view in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, where he states: "the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire" (1992: 319). The betrayal of one's desire (of not having 'acted in conformity with the desire that is in you', impervious to the prescriptions instilled in us by ideology) binds us more strongly to the Law, and that concomitantly provokes in us unappeasable guilty feelings which are dispensed by an agency Lacan calls "superego" (1992: 314). For Lacan, the superego is not that which regulates our adaptation to social prescriptions through inflicting guilt on us for violating them, but, rather, the perverse agency that orders us to derive enjoyment from our submission to the Law and the guilt-ridden renunciation of our desire.<sup>18</sup> This superego agency is however related to the figure of the obscene father of the primal horde in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, the "violent, jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away the growing sons" (1998: 121). In the Freudian myth, the sons killed the father and erected social restrictions as barriers to the full access to *jouissance* that the primordial father had enjoyed and which is now strictly forbidden for the community of sons (a renunciation dubbed *castration* in psychoanalytical theory). The murder of the father-*jouissier* is succeeded by a figure or mode of paternal authority deprived of enjoyment: namely, the Name-of-the-Father, the set prohibitions and regulations that make up the symbolic order that structures reality and constitutes subjects by binding them to the Law. Our constitution as subjects of the symbolic order entails what Lacan made clear was a forced choice: "*Your money or your life!* If I choose the money [*jouissance*], I lose both [I die as a subject with a place within the symbolic order even before I am born]. If I choose life [an identity invested by the symbolic order], I have life without money, namely, a life deprived of something [*pre-symbolic jouissance*]" (1981: 212). As Žižek puts it: "the emergence of the subject from the encounter of a presymbolic life substance of 'enjoyment' and the symbolic order, ... the inclusion of the subject in the symbolic community, has the structure of a *forced choice*: the subject supposed to choose freely his community ... does not exist prior to this choice, he is constituted by means of it" (1992: 74-75).<sup>19</sup> But this constitutive inclusion brought about by a forced choice has an obscene underside in the agency of the superego, the leftover of the primordial, uncastrated father whose demand of enjoyment mortifies us and reinforces our subjection through his voice: "Although, unlike this dead father, we have submitted to 'castration', *his*

<sup>18</sup> In *Encore*, we come across Lacan's most explicit reformulation of the Freudian superego: "Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*) except the superego. The superego is the imperative of *jouissance*—Enjoy!" (1998: 3). See also Žižek (1994b: 68).

<sup>19</sup> The choice is between symbolic identity and psychosis, between bad and worse (Žižek 1992: 75-76).

voice persists as an object-remainder in the symbolic fabric, exhorting us to derive enjoyment from the law" (Kay 2003: 171. Emphasis added).

Marlow's loyalty to Kurtz's spectre is actually the unethical submission to this obscene superego, not the ethical injunction to keep the field of otherness open for Justice *à venir*. Žižek, himself, states *à propos* 'Heart of Darkness' that Conrad is to be credited for being the first in portraying this obscene perverse father in literature: "[the] figure of the 'other father'—the obscene, uncanny, shadowy double of the Name of the Father—emerged for the first time in all its force in the novels of Joseph Conrad" (1992: 158).<sup>20</sup> In Žižek's view, Marlow's predicament is marked by his incapability of getting rid of the primordial father.<sup>21</sup> This subjection is, indeed, literally rendered in terms of a 'forced choice' (a 'choice' that was 'ordered'), a mark of the subject's inclusion in the symbolic order. In choosing the nightmare that Kurtz represents (his lack of restraint, his brutality and his greed) over the nightmare embodied by the Manager and his gang (corruption, inefficiency, manipulation), he is not choosing a better, fairer, more virtuous version of European or British imperialism, he is pretending to do so, knowing very well that the colonial enterprise is illegitimate, criminal and unjust. What Marlow is truly forced to choose is Kurtz *qua* obverse side of the Name of the Father, whose representative figure in the text is the apathetic director of the Company he interviewed to sign his 'contract':

A door opened, a white-haired secretarial head ... appeared, and a skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. Its light was dim, and a heavy writing-desk squatted in the middle. From behind that structure came out an impression of pale plumpness in a frock-coat. The great man himself. He was five feet six, I should judge, and had his grip on the handle-end of ever so many millions. He shook hands, I fancy, murmured vaguely, was satisfied with my French. *Bon voyage* (Conrad 1946: 56; Italics in the original).

That Kurtz is the obscene double of the Name of the Father (that is, of symbolic authority emptied of *jouissance*) is rendered in the narrative by an echo, a reappearance in Marlow's mind of one of the feminine figures flanking the door of the Company's *sancta sanctorum*. Going after Kurtz to prevent his joining his night adorers, Marlow tells his audience, "I had some imbecile thoughts. The knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair" (Conrad 1946: 142). The same figure opens the door onto both the Name-of-the-Father and its obscene underside.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Some of the features Žižek attributes to Kurtz fit his most famous filmic counterpart (Captain Willard in *Apocalypse Now*) better than the original character in the Conrad novella.

<sup>21</sup> Private conversation with Slavoj Žižek on July 9, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> This irruption is already anticipated in Marlow's prospective comment on his exit from the great man's office: "Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes" (Conrad 1946: 57). Marlow's description of the street and the office building is Kafkaesque *avant la lettre* (Conrad 1946: 55). 'Heart of Darkness' also anticipates Kafka's universe by establishing a link between the Law and *jouissance*, yet, whereas in Kafka the Law (the bureaucratic legal machinery) and *jouissance* are united in the same figures or inhabit the same spaces ("obscene judges who, during night interrogations, glance through pornographic books", or the couple copulating in the very courtroom where poor Joseph K. is being interrogated by the judges in *The Trial* [Žižek 1992b: 146]), in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' they are embodied by two different figures who, though connected in Marlow's mind, inhabit two different spaces: on the one hand, the director and the Company's headquarters, and, on the other, Kurtz and the jungle.

Tony Jackson (1994) states that Marlow left the Central Station in the hope that Kurtz would be the one man capable enough to bring “the Law of the Father to the uncivilized”, to a land that that he increasingly portrays as a pre-symbolic realm that threatens to engulf and drown the white man in a sea of unbearable *jouissance* (1994: 106).<sup>23</sup> As he tells his audience at the end of Part I, he was so disgusted by the corruption and inefficiency of the men in charge of the two stations (exception made of the chief accountant) that he was eager, “curious to see whether this man [Kurtz], who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb up to the top and how he would set about his work when there” (Conrad 1946: 88). In sum, Marlow hoped Kurtz would stand as the Name of the Father, as the figure of symbolic authority that structures the real into reality by the imposition of the letter of the Law emptied of enjoyment —hence his insistence that “I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as *discoursing*”, and his fear that he would never had the opportunity to hear the “gifted creature” “speak” (Conrad 1946: 113. Emphasis added).

Kurtz’s talents and his performance did to a certain extent elevate him to that position of the Name of the Father, so that Marlow’s loyalty to him could be interpreted as his determination to preserve Kurtz’s status as a “remarkable man” (Conrad 1946: 138): as a competent coloniser with a stock of knowledge to improve commercial interests in the region (versus the Manager’s lack of efficiency as just “a common trader” with “peddling notions” [Conrad 1946: 73, 137]) yet whose plans were thwarted by the corruption and unfair play installed in the Company; as an apt contributor to the propaganda machinery (he gives a journalist friend of Kurtz’s the latter’s Report on the Suppression of Savage Customs for publication with the post-script conveniently torn off); as a relative caring enough to send “some family letters” Marlow gives his cousin (Conrad 1946: 154); and as a fiancé for whose love story Marlow provides a sublime melodramatic ending by telling the Intended that Kurtz’s last word was “your name” (Conrad 1946: 161).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Marlow insists that he felt compelled to keep Kurtz’s reputation: “I was to have care of his memory. I’ve done enough for it to give me the indisputable right to lay it, if I choose, for the everlasting rest in the dust-bin of progress. ... But then, you see, I can’t choose. He won’t be forgotten. Whatever he was, he was not common” (Conrad 1946: 118-19).<sup>25</sup>

In this way, it could be argued that ‘Heart of Darkness’ repeats the same pattern found in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, where the young Danish prince is called on by the ghost of his murdered father to settle his accounts after his premature death. Kurtz’s spectre, like the ghost of old King Hamlet, inhabits what Žižek calls, after Lacan, a “place ‘between two deaths’”, between his physical, biological death and his symbolic death, the payment of his debt to the Other (1989: 135). However, Marlow’s careful defence of Kurtz’s reputation does not end in the pacifying exorcism of the spectre. Furthermore, he even entertains an attitude of ironic distance towards what he feels is Kurtz’s illegitimate claim, a detachment that is of kind with his reaction to his aunt’s foolish belief in the goodness of the civilising

<sup>23</sup> Notice how sometimes the natives are portrayed as secretions or excrescences of the jungle *qua* Thing: “streams of human beings—of naked human beings— ... were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest”; or “the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration” (Conrad 1946: 133, 134).

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the melodramatic outcome in the typically masculine way of negotiating the split between the non-phallic (ethical goals and public aspirations and activities) and the phallic (sexual enjoyment) see Žižek (1994b: 152).

<sup>25</sup> Or, later on, Marlow promises the hectic Russian harlequin: “Mr. Kurtz’s reputation is safe with me’. I did not know how truly I spoke” (Conrad 1946: 139).

mission and to the Intended's faith in Kurtz's devotion to both social ideals and to his love for her. Thus, Marlow's mimicking echo of the Intended's expressions of sincere feeling towards Kurtz ("I [the Intended] knew him best'. 'You knew him best', I [Marlow] repeated"; "His words, at least, have not died'. 'His words will remain', I said. 'And his example', she whispered to herself... 'True', I said; 'his example, too. Yes, his example, I forgot that"; "The last word he pronounced was--your name' ... 'I knew it—I was sure!' ... She knew. She was sure" [Conrad 1946: 158, 160, 161-62]) are in tune with Marlow's account of Kurtz's demand of justice with which Conrad chose to frame the final episode of his visit to the Intended: first Marlow says, "he [Kurtz] said one day, 'This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. ... I want no more than justice'... He wanted no more than justice—no more than justice" (Conrad 1946: 156. 2<sup>nd</sup> ellipsis in the original) and right at the end of his narrative, after telling the lie to the Intended, he states interrogatively: "Would [the heavens] have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he wanted only justice?" (Conrad 1946: 162). And what is more, Marlow even goes as far as disavowing his own forced choice of nightmares by criticising in the Russian harlequin an attachment to Kurtz that equally applies to him: "I almost envied him of this modest and clear flame ... I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz, though. It came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of *eager fatalism*" (Conrad 1946: 126-27. Emphasis added).

Ironic detachment and contradictory disavowal undermine the interpretation of Marlow's loyalty to Kurtz's ghost as an attempt to preserve his legacy. Furthermore, Miller's Derridean view that Kurtz's persisting spectrality is an instance of *hauntology* that keeps open the field of otherness which triggers off the proliferation of different interpretations and retains the promise of justice-to-come falls wide off the mark taking into consideration, among other things, Marlow's derisive statements precisely on Kurtz's claim for justice. The ghost in Marlow's narrative discourse has, in view of what has been said, the ideological function of filling in the gap that traverses the symbolic order, an abyssal void that Marlow experienced as an encounter with the real where an unconscious desire was announced.<sup>26</sup> So, it is not so much, as Reynold Humphries says, that Kurtz as a living-dead elicits Marlow's guilt because of his repressed incestuous desires, but, rather, it is his loyal attachment to the spectre of

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Ross (2004) offers a reading of what he calls a "virtually unexplored" area in the novella: namely, the interconnection between the ideological and the psychological (2004: 65). Desire is the element that links both dimensions: materialist desire for accumulation is the driving force of both individual colonial agents and of the Company as a corporate whole. Kurtz's final cry is an articulation of "his vision of the truth of desire, its absolute insatiability and basis in an irremediable subjective lack (what Lacan calls *déissance*) upon which the commercial culture of modernity capitalizes" (Ross 2004: 86). Though I find Ross's interpretation correct, his version of desire is completely different from the ethical conception which sustains my reading, which I draw from other moments in Lacan's *oeuvre* and which I relate to Marlow, not to Kurtz. Furthermore, Kurtz may have broken, as Ross explains, the Company's law and rediscovered "the instincts of unfettered desire in all their violence and uncompromising demand for unmitigated, uninterrupted, and undiluted *jouissance*" (2004: 82), yet his apparently regressive gesture does not bring about his abrogation of the Other as he still strives for the recognition of the symbolic order: for instance, he kept on writing for the newspapers and wanted kings to meet him at railways stations. Kurtz does not carry out an ethical act of breaking with the Law, but, rather, tries to circumvent the Company's control because the latter is *de facto* inefficient, corrupt and unfair to his commercial talents. And this is also the reason why I cannot but disagree with Žižek's view that Kurtz stands for "evilness *qua* ethical attitude" (1992: 158).



Kurtz that makes Marlow feel guilty for having compromised his unconscious desire and stopped short in carrying out the truly ethical act of *separation* from the symbolic order he finds wanting, lacking. Kurtz, as Žižek points out, stands for the obscene father of the primal horde, the obverse shadowy figure of the Name of the Father that Marlow is incapable and unwilling to exorcise. Marlow carries out his appointed function within the symbolic order *and, at the same time*, remains attached to the obscene underside of the Law through his adherence to “Mr. Kurtz”, to “the shade of Mr. Kurtz” (Conrad 1946: 117).

### 5. Kurtz’s spectre goes aural: seeing, hearing and sticking to the Law

As advanced above, the type of spectre Marlow deals with so as to remain inscribed within the symbolic order is an increasingly aural one. It is Kurtz as an overpowering ghostly voice that prevails over his more visual aspect, a voice that becomes more and more a sound disengaged from its human source, a purely terrifying, yet appealing, echo that carries no meaning.<sup>27</sup> Marlow had hoped that Kurtz’s discourse would be that of the Law of the Father capable of investing order on the surrounding devastation and inefficiency, yet he ends up being bound to the undying echo of the primal father’s expiring whisper. “The man presented himself as a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action. ... That was not the point. The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preëminently ... was his ability to talk, his words” (Conrad 1946: 113). Marlow chooses a voice among disembodied voices, a voice which condenses “the ghost of his [Kurtz’s] gifts” and still ‘lingers’ while he is telling the story: “And I heard—him—*it*—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time *lingers around me*, impalpable, like a *dying vibration* of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, *without any kind of sense*” (Conrad 1946: 114-15; Emphases added).

Kurtz’s aural spectre is spoken of in objective terms: his voice becomes a haunting object, an ‘it’. Mladen Dolar (1996) criticises the abandonment of voice, of sound, in Saussurean linguistics (that reduces it to phonemes within a structure) and in Derridean deconstruction (that attacks its consideration as self-transparent presence). For Dolar, voice is, rather, “the object in the Lacanian sense ... [.] a leftover heterogeneous in relation to the structural logic that includes it” and “an interior obstacle to self-presence” (1996: 9-10, 16). Žižek (1996) speaks of the voice in similar terms: “voice is that which, in the signifier, resists meaning, it stands for the opaque inertia that cannot be recuperated by meaning” (1996: 103). And he adds, “voice is neither dead nor alive: its primordial phenomenological status is rather that of the living dead, of a spectral apparition that somehow survives its own death, that is the eclipse of meaning” (Žižek 1996: 103). The sound that epitomises Kurtz *qua* “eloquent phantom”—a ghost Marlow declares he “shall see ... as long as I live”—is his final cry: “‘The horror! The horror!’” (Conrad 1946: 160, 149). It is this whisper, inaudible for the Intended, that reverberates in Marlow’s mind at the culminating point of his interview with this woman: “‘Don’t you hear them [Kurtz’s last words]?’ The dusk repeating them in a

<sup>27</sup> Ivan Kreilkamp (1997) relates the disembodied voice to the invention of the phonograph at the turn of the nineteenth century: “If the ‘horror’ ascribed to Kurtz has something to do with his status as an individual who becomes nothing more or less than his voice, then his representation suggests the experience—new to Conrad and his readers in the late 1890s—of hearing someone’s voice reproduced by a phonograph” (Kreilkamp 1997: 231).



persistent whisper all around us ... "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 1946: 161). Marlow's mystifying mixture of seeing and hearing can be clarified by taking into account Žižek's view that voice "points toward a gap in the field of the visible, toward the dimension of what eludes our gaze. In other words, their relationship is mediated by an impossibility: *ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything*" (1996: 93. Emphasis in the original).<sup>28</sup> In Marlow's account of Kurtz's final cry we find a similar logic at work: a meaningless voice standing for what cannot be seen, a voice to which meaning and moral value is attached retrospectively by the voluntaristic listener:

He had summed up—he had judged. "The horror! He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a *vibrating note* of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a *glimpsed* truth—the strange commingling of desire and hate. ... True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the *invisible*. Perhaps! I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry—much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I *heard* once more, *not his own voice, but the echo of his magnificent eloquence thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal* (Conrad 1946: 151-52. Emphases added).

It is the spectral echo, the object voice, through which Marlow hears either what cannot be seen (*invisible*), or what can be seen through (*cliff of crystal*). It is through the resonating whisper that Marlow 'sees' Kurtz's phantom as long as he lives.

If Marlow chooses Kurtz's nightmarish voice over the other voices and remains loyal to *it* to the end and beyond, it is because Kurtz's voice is that of the obscene authoritarian father of the primordial horde. Kurtz's credentials as such a figure are repeatedly displayed in often-quoted passages such as: "Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" (Conrad 1946: 131); "I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low" (Conrad 1946: 144; see also Conrad 1946: 116, 117-18). The voice that haunts Marlow is, as any other voice *qua* spectral object, linked to the superego in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Mladen Dolar summarises what I have pointed out above in reference to the obscenely mortifying nature of the superego and relates it precisely to the voice object. The superego, he says, is "not just an internalization of the Law, but something endowed with a surplus that puts the subject into a position of ineradicable guilt: the more one obeys, the more one is guilty. ... [T]he surplus of the superego over the Law is precisely the surplus of the voice; the superego has a voice, the Law is stuck with the letter" (Dolar 1996: 14).

This voice that is beyond meaning, sense or *logos*, is, therefore, attached to the Law, it works (to use Žižek's own words from a long quotation above) as "an uncanny spectral supplement" by means of which "the circle of reality can be closed" (1994: 21).<sup>29</sup> For Dolar,

<sup>28</sup> For an enlightening reading of the scopic drive in 'Heart of Darkness' that draws substantially on Lacan's conception of the *gaze* see Devlin (2006). Devlin aptly shows how the wilderness-as-gaze, which Marlow tries uselessly to block and undermine, is a symptom of his and the European colonisers' precarious sense of mastery over the colonised lands and peoples.

<sup>29</sup> Herein resides the difference between the ideological reading I propose and Vincent Pecora's dense and suggestive phenomenological and existentialist interpretation of the Conrad novella in 'Heart of Darkness and the Phenomenology of Voice'. Drawing on Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and

the object voice *par excellence* is that of the father of the horde, whose dying cry permeates the field of Law, echoing in the open crack constitutive of the symbolic order, yet serving in the last instance to cover it and to invest upon it a precarious sense of closure. The voice of the primordial father is the necessary and, at once, unavoidable counterpart of the Name of the Father. In reference to Lacan's discussion of the *shofar* (a primitive horn used in religious rituals) in his seminar on anxiety, Dolar argues that "one has to recognise, in the sound of the shofar, the voice of the Father, *the cry of the dying primal Father of the primitive horde, the leftover, which comes both to haunt the foundation of his Law and to seal it*" (1996: 26. Emphasis added). It is this object voice, Dolar goes on, that "bears witness to the rest of that presupposed and terrible Father's *jouissance*, which couldn't be absorbed by the Law, that reverse side of the Father that Lacan calls *le-père-la-jouissance*, his ultimate deadly cry that accompanies the instituted Law" (1996: 27; Italics in the original).<sup>30</sup> It is precisely through his loyal attachment to Kurtz's spectral superegoic voice that Marlow avoids confronting the lack in the symbolic order he came to experience and refrains from carrying out a final ethical act of freedom. In spite of being witness to the evils of the *mission civilisatrice*, Marlow is incapable of truly transcending imperialist ideology, of—in Edward W. Said's terms in reference to the Conrad novella—"tak[ing] the next step" and "imagin[ing] a fully realized alternative to imperialism" (1993: 30, 25). In the last instance, this incapability follows the logic of a failure to exorcise Kurtz's spectre, of "‘doing the impossible’, traversing the fantasy toward the Real”, of carrying out a true act (Žižek 2000: 127).

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Derrida, Pecora argues that "Kurtz's voice, though severely reduced, in the end *does* reaffirm for Marlow a living presence and moral strength" (1985: 1003). Towards the end of his essay, Pecora qualifies the previous statement, yet concludes that Kurtz's voice remains for Marlow an illusion of self-presence (1985: 1008). As I have maintained throughout, it is not only that Marlow's experience of Kurtz's voice could not be reduced to an illusion of self-presence (not to say moral wisdom as Pecora affirms in the first quotation from his essay), but precisely that its unappeasable and senseless spectrality supplements the lack in the set of what Pecora calls "cultural expectations", or "moral, political, and psychological" norms and standards, of, in sum, the ideology of Western imperialism in which Marlow and his audience are inscribed (1985: 1003, 997).

<sup>30</sup> "For what endows the Law with authority is also what irretrievably bars it, and the attempts to banish the other voice, the voice beyond logos, are ultimately based in the impossibility of coming to terms with the Law's inherent alterity, placed at the point of its inherent lack *which voice comes to cover*" (Dolar 1996: 28. Emphasis added).

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